



Finding Bambi – What to Do with Mule Deer Fawns

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Summer is the time of year when we get out into the mountains to hike, bike, fish, and boat, to name a few of the wonderful recreational opportunities in Utah. Sometimes in our wanderings we come across juvenile wildlife without their mothers - “babies” - and it is our natural instinct to want to help. We pick up the “abandoned” baby - deer, rabbit, bird - and take it home in an attempt to save it. What we don’t understand is that there are many reasons why we might come across a juvenile all alone. It is most likely that the animal has not been abandoned and is in no trouble at all. In the early summer it is not uncommon to come across a mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) fawn.

Mule deer are common throughout Utah, spending most of their time in the foothills and mountains, where they eat sprouting grasses, young twigs, lichens, fruit, mushrooms and other easily digestible foods. In Utah, mule deer offspring, fawns, are born late April - June. They are precocial, meaning they are born with fur and their eyes are open. They can stand within minutes of

being born, and can walk within 8 hours. It is common for healthy mule deer does (females) to give birth to twins. Although fawns are able to walk within a day of their birth, they are not very strong for a few weeks; this, coupled with their size, makes them particularly vulnerable to predators during this period.

Mule deer have several strategies to keep them safe as fawns. First, they are born with brown fur speckled with white dots. This color pattern helps them to blend in with the environment, especially woodlands with bits of light peeking through. Additionally, fawns don’t have a strong odor. Most of their predators - mountain lions, bears, coyotes - hunt by smell. Thus, fawns are difficult to find during this time.

During the first few weeks of their lives, mule deer mothers will hide their fawns from predators by having them bed down in the grass. Once the fawn is hidden, the mother can safely go in search of food. She needs to eat in order to produce milk for the fawn. However, she does not go too far away from her fawn. When a human (a potential predator) approaches, she stays out of sight, in order to protect herself and her fawn. While you may not see her, she is most likely nearby and will return for her fawn soon.



Fawns hide in grass to stay safe while their mothers forage for food.

What do you do if you find one?

If you are lucky enough to find a fawn or other juvenile wildlife, step quietly away from the animal. It is alright to take a picture from a distance, to remember your experience.

- Do not walk up to the fawn. Disturbing the animal may cause it to cry out and alert predators in the area.
- Do not touch the fawn. Your scent could lead a predator to the fawn. There are many predators that have learned to follow human scent in search of food.
- Walk past the fawn, looping away from the animal. Do not stop to look at the fawn and then back track, because you've left a dead-end for predators to explore.
- Do not pick up the fawn and take it with you. Doing so removes the baby from where the mother can find it.

If someone you know has taken a young fawn, immediately return the fawn to the exact location where it was found.

- When returning it, wear rubber gloves to decrease your scent.
- Take a towel with you.
- Once at the release site, and wearing your rubber gloves, rub the towel in the grass, and then all over the fawn.

Walk away from the fawn so that the mother no longer senses danger. The mother will return to her baby.

On rare occasions people come across deer fawns that *are* in need of assistance or hurt. Perhaps a mother has been hurt - hit by a car, killed by a predator - and cannot return. If you find a fawn wandering aimlessly and crying, there is a good chance that it has lost its mother. Contact the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources state office for assistance (801-538-4700). Their website also lists regional office contacts (www.wildlife.utah.gov)

If the deer appears to have a broken leg or other injury, but is standing and walking, leave the animal alone. Wild animals have an amazing capacity to heal. Chasing the animal to capture and "help" it would only injure it more. If you are unsure if the animal can heal on its own, take a picture, and contact the Utah Division of Wildlife



Mule deer fawns' spotted backs help them blend in with their surroundings.

Resources or Utah State University Extension (extension.usu.edu/wildlifeconflicts; 435-586-1924) for assistance.

If you hit and kill a doe (female deer) while driving during the early summer, pull the animal far off the road. If the doe had offspring, there is a good chance a fawn is nearby. It will stay by its mother for hours; if the mother is close to the road, there is the potential for the fawn to get hit, too.

For most of us, seeing wildlife while recreating outdoors is one of the best experiences we can have. Getting to see a mule deer fawn bedded down is not an everyday occasion, and it is exciting. Acting responsibly around the fawn will keep it safe and leave you with a positive story to share with friends and family.

References

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